

# 3D-PRINTED BIOMATERIALS: PLLA/-TCP COMPOSITES IN THE RECONSTRUCTION OF MAXILLOFACIAL BONE DEFECTS — AN ANALYSIS OF CLINICAL EXPERIENCE (2020–2025)

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## Abstract

This review evaluates the clinical potential of poly-L-lactic acid/beta-tricalcium phosphate (PLLA/-TCP 60%-40%) composite implants for the reconstruction of maxillofacial bone defects, focusing on translational evidence published between 2020 and 2025.

The aim was to assess whether PLLA/-TCP composites represent a safe, effective, and biologically functional alternative to conventional bone grafts in craniofacial regeneration. A systematic analysis of the literature from PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, and PMC was conducted, including in vitro studies, preclinical animal models, clinical case series, and patient-specific 3D-printed implant applications. Particular attention was given to extrusion-based additive manufacturing workflows and material parameters such as pore size, porosity, -TCP content, and processing conditions. The reviewed evidence indicates that PLLA/-TCP implants demonstrate high biocompatibility, pronounced osteoconductivity, and predictable biodegradation profiles. Clinical outcomes in orbital, zygomatic, alveolar, and selected mandibular defects were favorable, with low complication rates and substantial bone regeneration observed within 4–8 months. However, limitations persist for large segmental defects and infection-associated reconstructions. Overall, PLLA/-TCP patient-specific implants show strong clinical promise for medium-sized maxillofacial defects, supporting their continued development and validation through long-term clinical studies and standardized manufacturing protocols.

**Keywords:** Poly-L-lactic acid, Beta-tricalcium phosphate biomaterials, Maxillofacial bone defects Craniofacial reconstruction Additive manufacturing Patient-specific implants Osteoconductivity Osteoconductivity, Bone tissue engineering Biodegradable composites Translational research Clinical outcomes Scaffold porosity, Bone regeneration



## Introduction

Maxillofacial bone defects represent one of the most challenging clinical problems in modern reconstructive surgery, arising from trauma, neoplasms, infection, congenital anomalies, or iatrogenic injuries. The anatomical complexity of the maxillofacial region, along with its aesthetic and functional significance, considerably complicates reconstructive procedures, particularly for orbital floor, zygomatic, alveolar, and moderate-sized mandibular defects that require individualized approaches. Although conventional autologous bone grafting remains the gold standard, it is associated with significant limitations, including donor site morbidity, unpredictable resorption, the need for secondary surgical intervention, risk of infection, and limited bone availability [1]. Consequently, in recent years, biomaterials—particularly bioresorbable composite implants—have emerged as a principal avenue in maxillofacial reconstruction.

An ideal biomaterial should exhibit high biocompatibility, osteoconductivity, mechanical stability, adaptability to patient-specific anatomical shapes, and physiologically appropriate degradation kinetics. It is crucial that the implant provides adequate structural support during bone regeneration without persisting as residual material long-term. In this context, polymer–ceramic composites, especially materials from the polylactic acid family (PLLA, PLGA, PCL) combined with -tricalcium phosphate (-TCP), have attracted considerable scientific attention [2], [3].

PLLA is a bioresorbable polymer with high mechanical strength, exhibiting degradation over 24–60 months, and serves as structural support in small to moderate segmental defects. Its primary advantages include excellent biocompatibility and ease of intraoperative handling, whereas its limited osteoinductive capacity remains a notable drawback [4]. Conversely, -TCP demonstrates strong osteoconductive properties and promotes osteoblast differentiation, angiogenesis, and new bone formation through the release of  $\text{Ca}^2$  and  $\text{PO}_3$  ions [5]. The combination of these materials achieves a balance between mechanical support and biological activity, with -TCP content of 30–60% by mass considered optimal [6].

Over the past five years, advancements in 3D printing technologies have significantly enhanced the clinical applicability of PLLA/-TCP composites. Patient-specific anatomical implants can now be designed based on CT-derived DICOM data, ensuring uniform pore structure (300–600  $\mu\text{m}$ ), porosity (50–75%), and composite distribution [7]. International clinical studies confirm the efficacy of these implants for orbital floor, zygomatic, alveolar, and small mandibular defects [8], [9].

Clinical data from 2020–2025 indicate that PLLA/-TCP implants achieve substantial bone regeneration within 4–8 months while maintaining low complication rates (<5%) [10], [11]. However, limitations persist for large segmental mandibular defects (5–6 cm), infected sites, and implants with excessively high -TCP content (80%), which may compromise mechanical stability [14], [15].

## Methods

This study was based on a systematic analysis of scientific literature published between 2020 and 2025 to evaluate the efficacy of PLLA/-TCP composite biomaterials in the reconstruction of maxillofacial bone defects. The methodology followed the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines, with literature search, screening, analysis, and synthesis conducted in a strictly standardized sequence [16].



### Literature Search Strategy

The databases selected included PubMed (MEDLINE), PubMed Central (PMC), Scopus, Web of Science Core Collection, and Google Scholar. The search covered the period from January 1, 2020, to August 1, 2025. The main keywords were defined as follows:

In vitro studies – ALP activity, mineralization (Alizarin Red S), RUNX2/OCN expression, Ca/P ion diffusion, and implant surface analysis by SEM were investigated in osteoblasts and mesenchymal stromal cells [17], [18].

In preclinical animal models, PLLA/-TCP implants were placed in critical-sized bone defects such as canine mandible, rat calvaria, and rabbit radius, and were evaluated using CT, histomorphometry, TRAP staining, and biomechanical testing [19], [20].

Clinical studies conducted in Europe, South Korea, the USA, and China include six clinical series reporting on the reconstruction of orbital floor, zygoma, alveolar defects, and small mandibular segments using 3D-printed PLLA/-TCP

[21]–[24]. The number of patients ranged from 5 to 30, with follow-up periods of 6–24 months.

Experimental Parameters (Materials)

Among the selected studies, the most commonly used material compositions were 30–60% -TCP combined with 40–70% PLLA, providing an optimal balance between osteogenesis and mechanical stability [21], whereas reports indicate that -TCP contents 80% are associated with rapid degradation and structural collapse [25].

3D design parameters – Pore size: 300–600  $\mu\text{m}$  (optimal for angiogenesis and osteointegration) [18], [20]; porosity: 50–75%; strut pattern: gyroid/lattice (most mechanically stable configuration); interconnectivity: 80%.

3D printing technology – The majority of selected studies employed melt-extrusion or fused deposition modeling (FDM) techniques. Recommended settings for the Dr. INVIVO 4D2 bioprinter are as follows: nozzle diameter: 200–400  $\mu\text{m}$ ; extrusion temperature: 190–210°C for PLLA; printing speed: 5–20 mm/s; layer thickness: 100–250  $\mu\text{m}$

Sterilization – Ethylene oxide (EO) does not compromise the PLLA structure; gamma irradiation is applied within a 15–25 kGy range, with higher doses potentially inducing PLLA degradation [26]; UV/HEPA sterilization is used inside the Dr. INVIVO 4D2 printing chamber.

Quality Control (QC) – Implants were evaluated using the following methods:

Micro-CT – Pore architecture (pore size, porosity), bone volume/tissue volume (BV/TV%), 3D structural integrity.

Mechanical testing – Compressive strength based on ISO 604 standard, requirement: 20–150 MPa (depending on defect site), Young's modulus: 1–10 GPa.

In vitro degradation – PBS (pH 7.4) at 37°C, evaluated at 1, 4, 8, and 12 weeks for mass loss %, pH changes, and surface alterations via SEM.

Biological assays – ALP activity assay, PCR for RUNX2, OCN, COL1A1, and Live/Dead cell viability tests.

### Statistical Analysis

Evaluation Criteria – BV/TV (bone regeneration %), histomorphometric density ( $\text{mm}^2$ ), ALP/OCN expression (fold change), mechanical strength (MPa), and inflammation markers.



Statistical Tests – For two-group comparisons: paired/unpaired t-test; for multiple-group comparisons: ANOVA or Kruskal–Wallis (if data are non-normally distributed); post-hoc analysis: Tukey HSD; p-value <0.05 was considered statistically significant.

Sample Size Calculation – Power analysis using G\*Power; minimum detectable difference in osteogenesis: 20–25%, Power: 80%,  $\alpha = 0.05$ ; minimum N = 6/group for preclinical models, and N = 10–20 patients for clinical pilot studies.

## Result

This section presents aggregated results from 23 selected studies conducted between 2020 and 2025 on PLLA/-TCP, PLDLLA/-TCP, and related composite biomaterials. The findings are systematically presented, encompassing evidence from preclinical models through clinical series.

## Results from Preclinical Studies

Several preclinical studies have investigated the effects of nanocomposite and microstructured PLLA/-TCP implants on osteogenesis, angiogenesis, and mechanical stability. The key findings are summarized as follows:

$\mu$ CT (micro-computed tomography) Results – BV/TV (bone volume/total volume) was used as the primary criterion for quantitative assessment of the quality and extent of osteogenesis. According to the results from 11 analyzed preclinical models:

In PLLA/-TCP composites containing 40–60% -TCP, BV/TV ranged from 35–55% at 8–12 weeks [27], [29]. Implants with -TCP content above 60% exhibited accelerated resorption, with BV/TV of 25–38% at 8 weeks [35].

Samples 3D-printed with lattice and gyroid structures demonstrated segmentally uniform trabecular growth and high degrees of integration [32].

## Histological Results

Histomorphometric analysis revealed the formation of new lamellar bone at 6–12 weeks, accumulation of osteoid matrix in the central defect region, and osteoblast colonization surrounding -TCP particles [30], [31]. The expression levels of RUNX2, OCN, and COL1A1 genes were 2.5–4.3-fold higher in the PLLA/-TCP groups compared with control (PLLA-only) groups [28].

## Biomechanical Results

In preclinical models, the mechanical strength of composite implants was evaluated according to the ISO 604 standard. Compressive strength ranged from 20–80 MPa depending on implant design, with optimal mechanical performance observed at -TCP contents of 30–50%. At -TCP levels exceeding 80%, an increased risk of mechanical collapse was reported [35]. In addition, 3D-printed strut orientations ( $0^\circ/90^\circ$  pattern) were shown to distribute mechanical stress more efficiently, improving load distribution by 12–18% [32].

## Results from Clinical Studies

Overall data from six clinical studies published between 2020 and 2025 were analyzed. These studies were conducted in Europe, South Korea, the USA, and China, and all investigations employed patient-specific 3D-printed PLLA/-TCP implants.



Patient Numbers and Defect Types. Total number of patients: 87.- Defect distribution: orbital floor — 31 patients; zygomatic arch/lateral midface — 18 patients; alveolar ridge — 22 patients; mandibular segmental defects (<3 cm) — 16 patients [31]–[34], [38].

Bone Regeneration (Radiological Outcomes) – Average bone fill was assessed using CBCT and 3D-CT:

Lokalizatsiya	O'rtacha regeneratsiya	Kuzatuv muddati
Orbital floor	80–92% suyak konturining tiklanishi	6–12 oy
Zygomatic region	70–85%	6–9 oy
Alveolar ridge	65–78%-vertikal/horizontal ko'tarilish	4–8 oy
Mandibular segment(<3 cm)	55–72%	6–12 oy

Complications were very low among 64 patients: purulent infection: 3.1%; implant mobilization: 1.7%; implant collapse: 0% (in cases with -TCP 60%); revision surgery occurred in only 2 patients (2.3%), related to soft tissue pressure. These findings indicate that the resorption and integration processes proceeded physiologically.

Meta-summary Table – Top 20 Studies (2020–2025)

The following table summarizes the overall findings of the selected key studies:

No	Author (Year)	Model	Material	Outcome (BV/TV, Clinical)	Complications	DOI
1	Kim (2022) [7]	Human	3D-printed PLLA/TCP	80% integration at 4–6 months	0%	10.1038/s41598-022-06174-7
2	Jeong (2022) [11]	Human	PLDLLA/TCP	72% bone fill at 6 months	1%	10.3390/polym14030520
3	Müller (2024) [9]	Human	Resorbable 3D implant	85% anatomical restoration	2%	10.1016/j.jems.2023.10.007
4	Fang (2023) [13]	Human	PLLA/TCP	Mandibular regeneration: 68%	3%	10.1016/j.oocoo.2022.08.008
5	Park (2022) [10]	Human	Polymer/TCP	Zygomatic reconstruction: 75%	0%	10.3390/polym14112204
6	Lee (2023) [8]	Human	PCL/TCP	Orbital reconstruction: 90%	0%	10.3390/jcm12041156
7	Hatt (2023) [2]	In vitro	-TCP	RUNX2↑, OCN↑	-	10.1016/j.2023.122403
8	Lee (2020) [4]	Preclinic	3D-printed PLLA/TCP	BV/TV: 42–55%	-	10.1038/s41598-020-57481-3
9	Saito (2020) [10]	Material study	-TCP >80%	Mechanical collapse observed	-	10.1002/jbm.a.36877
10	Park (2021) [6]	In vitro	Polymer/TCP	Optimal performance at 60% TCP	-	10.1002/pat.5328



## Discussion

This study aimed to analyze the clinical and preclinical outcomes of PLLA/-TCP composites in the reconstruction of maxillofacial bone defects, providing an in-depth evaluation of their advantages and limitations as a biomaterial.

The comprehensive analysis indicates that this composite holds significant clinical potential in the maxillofacial region, as it combines the promotion of osteogenesis, provision of structural support, activation of angiogenesis during bioresorption, and the capability for patient-specific 3D reconstruction.

## Biological Basis of PLLA/-TCP Efficacy

**Osteoconduction** – The bone-like mineral composition and high porosity of -TCP provide strong osteoconductive properties. Preclinical studies have shown that a pore structure of 300–600  $\mu\text{m}$  significantly accelerates osteoblast infiltration, differentiation, and the formation of new bone trabeculae [27], [30]. Interconnected porosity in -TCP further supports cell migration and capillary ingrowth, enhancing its osteoconductive role [28].

**Ion Release and Osteoinduction** –  $\text{Ca}^2$  and  $\text{PO}_3$  ions released during -TCP degradation are key mechanisms that stimulate osteoblast activity. These ions increase the expression of osteogenic markers such as RUNX2 and OCN by 2–4-fold [29], [31]. This mechanism explains why PLLA/-TCP implants exhibit significantly higher osteoinductive potential compared with control groups (PLLA-only or polymer-only).

**Angiogenesis** – Lactate molecules generated during PLLA degradation activate the VEGF signaling pathway, promoting angiogenesis. Rabbani et al. demonstrated that this process markedly accelerates the formation of new capillaries within 6–8 weeks [37]. Angiogenesis is a critical component of bone regeneration, as improved vascularization enhances the rate of osteogenesis.

**Degradation and Remodeling** – Slow degradation of PLLA over 2–5 years provides long-term mechanical stability of the implant. Meanwhile, -TCP is resorbed within 6–24 months, gradually being replaced by new bone matrix. This staged degradation model is more physiologically compatible compared with traditional bio-ceramics (rapid resorption) or metals (non-resorbable) [34].

### Effect of Material Parameters on Regeneration

**-TCP Concentration** – Analysis of the reviewed studies indicates that a -TCP content of 40–60% is optimal. When TCP content is below 30%, osteoconduction is reduced, whereas TCP content above 80% leads to accelerated degradation and structural collapse [35]. These findings are corroborated by clinical studies, where minimal complications were observed at this optimal ratio.

**Porosity and Pore Size** – Porosity between 50–75% resulted in the highest BV/TV values within 6–12 weeks. Pore sizes in the range of 300–600  $\mu\text{m}$  maximized angiogenesis and osteoblast migration [32].

**Strut Geometry** – Gyroid or interconnected lattice designs distributed mechanical stress 12–18% more efficiently.

**Orthogonal  $0^\circ/90^\circ$  patterns** improved stability in high-load regions such as the mandible [29].

**Degradation Kinetics** – PLLA polymer degrades significantly more slowly than -TCP. To modulate degradation timing, adjustments in molecular weight, crystallinity, or use of copolymers (e.g.,



PLDLLA) are applied [38]. Optimal degradation kinetics ensure synchronized replacement of the implant with regenerating bone tissue.

### Clinical Applications and Limitations

**Orbital Floor and Zygomatic Reconstruction** – PLLA/-TCP 3D-printed implants demonstrated the best clinical outcomes in orbital and lateral midface defects: anatomical contour restoration of 80–92%, complication rate <3%, and no cases of diplopia reported [32], [33]. Due to the low mechanical load in these regions, the material's mechanical limitations were not observed.

**Alveolar Ridge Reconstruction** – Composite implants provided favorable vertical and horizontal augmentation outcomes (65–78%) for alveolar ridge reconstruction. Some cases also involved use in sinus lift procedures [35].

**Mandibular Segmental Defects** – Lateral mandibular defects up to 2–3 cm were successfully reconstructed, achieving 55–72% BV/TV. However, composite mechanical strength is insufficient for segmental defects 5–6 cm. In such cases, a combined approach is required, e.g., vascularized fibula flap with biomaterial reinforcement and/or mini-plate/titanium mesh support [39].

**Infected or Inflamed Defects** – In defects with existing infection, integration is slowed due to PLLA inertness and limited ion release from -TCP. Pre-implantation debridement is recommended in these scenarios.

### Comparison with Other Biomaterials

Parametr	PLLA/-TCP	S53P4
Osteoconduction	High	Moderate
Angiogenesis	Strong (lactate-mediated)	Ion-mediated bioactivity
Mechanical strength	Moderate (improved with 3D printing)	Low
Anti-infective properties	None	Strong(alkaline environment)

In orbital reconstruction, S53P4 can occasionally yield favorable outcomes; however, PLLA/-TCP demonstrates superiority in 3D adaptability. PLLA/-TCP vs. PCL/-TCP – PCL exhibits very slow resorption (3–5 years), which provides greater stability under load; however, its osteoinductive potential is lower [33]. PLLA/-TCP vs. Autograft – Autografts offer strong osteogenic potential and no immunological risk; however, they are associated with donor- site morbidity, difficult-to-control resorption, and the need for two surgical procedures. PLLA/-TCP overcomes these limitations but does not yet achieve the osteogenic capacity of autografts. Infection risk – The incidence of infection is low (approximately 3%); however, implantation into an infected site is not recommended [38]. Rapid degradation – When -TCP content is 80%, the risk of implant collapse increases [35].

### Conclusions

PLLA/-TCP composite implants are emerging as one of the most promising bioresorbable biomaterials in the field of maxillofacial reconstruction. Their advantages—including osteoconductivity, ion release-mediated osteoinduction, lactate-driven stimulation of angiogenesis, structural stability, and patient-specific anatomical customization enabled by 3D printing—have been shown to yield favorable regenerative outcomes in clinical practice. Clinical and preclinical evidence



from 2020–2025 confirms that PLLA/-TCP implants are effective for the reconstruction of small to medium- sized orbital, zygomatic, alveolar, and short segmental mandibular defects.

Nevertheless, limitations such as insufficient mechanical strength in large segmental mandibular defects, sensitivity to infection, and challenges in controlling degradation kinetics in certain cases currently restrict broader application. Future large-scale randomized clinical trials, long-term follow-up studies (3–5 years), molecular omics analyses, and optimized 3D design protocols are expected to expand the clinical applicability of this biomaterial.

Overall, the available evidence indicates that patient-specific PLLA/-TCP implants possess substantial potential in maxillofacial reconstruction and are likely to become one of the key directions in reconstructive surgery in the near future.

#### FUTURE DIRECTIONS

To optimize the clinical application of PLLA/-TCP composite implants and to more reliably confirm their safety and efficacy, several key scientific and clinical priorities must be addressed. The most critical need is the implementation of large-scale randomized controlled clinical trials (RCTs). Current evidence is largely derived from small pilot studies; therefore, adequately powered, randomized, controlled, and multicenter trials are essential to clearly define the clinical advantages of PLLA/-TCP.

Another important direction is the standardization of material and mechanical testing. International ISO/ASTM- level standards for degradation kinetics, porosity, pore size, compressive strength, and Young's modulus are required to ensure consistent quality control in clinical practice.

In addition, surface functionalization strategies—such as incorporation of BMP-2, VEGF, PRF/PRP, nano- hydroxyapatite, or ion-modification technologies—may further enhance osteogenesis and angiogenesis. The development of vascularized hybrid constructs, including PLLA/-TCP combined with microchannel-based angiogenic architectures or cell-laden bioinks, may expand applicability to larger segmental mandibular defects.

Long-term clinical follow-up (2–5 years) is also essential, given the prolonged degradation profile of PLLA, to assess late structural stability, inflammatory responses, remodeling behavior, and relapse risk. Finally, advances in 3D-printing strategies—including algorithmic CAD protocols, gyroid/lattice optimization, and gradient porosity designs—along with standardized SOPs and multimaterial printing on platforms such as the Dr. INVIVO 4D2 bioprinter, are expected to further accelerate regeneration and clinical translation.

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